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By-Nine, Carmen Judith

Linguistic and Methodological Concepts Underlying a Pronunciation Course in English for Spanish-Speaking Seventh Graders in Puerto Rico.

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"An English Pronunciation Course for Puerto Rican Seventh-Graders" grew out of a similar remedial pronunciation course for freshmen at the University of Puerto Rico. One of the linguistic principles involved in teaching young adults a foreign language concerns the fact that "linguistic acquisition is stabilized by puberty," and language learning becomes progressively more difficult (but not impossible, as the author points out). Interference from the vernacular, another difficulty, is met with in these pronunciation courses by the use of visual representation of words containing the new sounds being practiced, rather than the written representation. The students concentrate first on hearing the new sounds and reproducing them, after which they are drilled from print. A knowledge of the nature of oral language is invaluable help in teaching difficult English sounds. Experiments show that one can learn to perceive the non-significant features of one's own language quite easily in another; it is only a matter of time and effort from perception to production. The courses, which end with a correlation lesson on the symbols used in the lessons and those used by a standard pocket dictionary, aim to give the students oral and listening skills which can help them to speak and understand English better. They must continue practicing these skills in an oral course in grammar. (AMM)

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LINGUISTIC AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPTS UNDERLYING A PRONUNCIATION COURSE IN ENGLISH FOR SPANISH-SPEAKING SEVENTH GRADERS IN PUERTO RICO.

(Talk given at the TESOL [1] Convention held in Chicago, Illinois, March 8, 1969, by Dr. Carmen Judith Nine, Director of the English Department in the Faculty of General Studies, at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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An English Pronunciation Course for Puerto Rican Seventh-Graders grew out of a similar pronunciation course that I teach at the University of Puerto Rico to freshman students who come to us from all over the island. This last course was fashioned for freshman students deficient in their command of oral English--about 600 students out of 3,500 who are admitted to the University of Puerto Rico every school year. However, these 600 freshman students belong to a select group. There are over 10,000 applicants for admission to the UPR every year; only these 3,500 are admitted yearly. The incredible fact is that all these students have had formal training in English for ten or more years in their elementary and secondary schooling. However, diagnostic testing in listening comprehension and speaking ability have shown that these 600 students apparently understand very little oral English and can hardly speak it at all. Generally, they understand English better when they read it.

Why is this situation so? Let me quote from a proposal prepared by the Englsih Section of the Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which Mrs. Teresa Monsanto de Cajigas, here present, directs. "A recent study on teacher preparation reveals that out of 4,216 teachers teaching English in Puerto Rico from the first to the third grade only 38 (less than 1%) are certified as teachers of English." Certification is granted to the teacher who has taken and passed 24 university credit hours in English and a course in the teaching of English as a second language. Not even 1% of our elementary school teachers have this certification! The statement continues: "Obviously...

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[1] TESOL--Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

these teachers cannot perform an acceptable job in the teaching of English. They do not know the language well enough to teach it. The problem keeps getting worse because although teachers in higher grade levels are better prepared they have to struggle against the students' incorrect language habits both in pronunciation and structure." [2]

Two years ago, Dr. Adela Méndez, who was then the Director of the English Section at the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, asked me to adapt my university course to the seventh grade of the public schools. The course for the seventh grade is thus a remedial course for young adults who already have a deficient command of oral English and who have difficulty in understanding it when it is spoken to them by a native speaker.

I have prepared a video-tape at our Government Station in Puerto Rico, WIPR, where you can see me teaching one of the lessons of the Seventh-Grade Course to a group of students from a Junior High School in San Juan, P.R. My talk here will be devoted to discussing some important linguistic principles and a few others in methodology that underlie both courses, and which I feel are basic in the preparation of any phonetics course in English for Spanish-speaking students who are already past the age of ten or twelve.

First of all, let us consider what it means to learn a foreign language as an adult, that is, after puberty. The development of good pronunciation habits in a foreign langauge entails immense difficulties if one begins after childhood. The biologist from Harvard, Eric H. Lenneberg, in his book Biological Foundations of Language, says that "linguistic acquisition is 'stabilized' by puberty." [3] Dr. Wilder Penfield, from the field of neurology at McGill University, wrote in a

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[2] Teresa Monsanto de Cajigas, Bilingual Education Program Preliminary Proposal, English Section, Department of Eduation of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, February, 1969, p. 2.

[3] Eric H. Lenneberg, Biological Foundations of Language, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New York, 1967.

personal letter to me that he believed that as the brain ages, it becomes progressively "stiff" and "rigid" for the purposes of learning languages, though he admitted that much can be done at any age. "After the age of ten or twelve, the general functional connections have been established or fixed for the speech cortex," he wrote.[4] In a paper he has written on early language learning, Dr. Penfield says that learning languages later is like getting married in middle age. He says it can be done, but the biological clock built in us favors an earlier age.[5]

If the above is true, then an oral course for adults in a foreign language is too difficult and unproductive a task to even consider taking up. Many people feel it is a waste of time. It is true that an adult learner who has not received training in the auditory and oral aspects of English as a foreign language when he was in elementary school must make conscious efforts to hear the new sounds and to practice the new muscular movements involved in articulating the new sounds. He does not have the child's uninhibited mimical abilities. But the adult carries within him certain tendencies that are a great help for this type of learning. The adult analyzes, relates, and categorizes. And he possesses the will to meaning. Thus, in both courses I have tried to make the phonetic content as meaningful as possible, and this I have been able to do by relating the content in English to the unconscious but vital experiences of the students with another language: their vernacular. The revelation of what is actually happening when they talk as Puerto Ricans is exciting news to the students. But above all, it makes the content of the pronunciation course understandable. They also understand why they must make special efforts in

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4 Wilder Penfield, M.D. (personal letter to Carmen Judith Nine, February 12, 1965.)

5 Benfield, "The Learning of Languages," FL Bulletin,No. 62, MLA, New York, April, 1960, p.2.

learning English, probably why they have not been able to learn it well--not because they are stupid, at all, which many secretly believe to be so--and very important, how much English they can learn under the circumstances.

The second consideration of importance to be made here has to do with another force that works against the learning of a foreign language as an adult. It is that of the interference of the vernacular. "This interference is virtually inevitable in second language learning because of the first language," says Bernard X. Harleston in "Learning Theory, Language Learning."[6] The course thus offers a lot of practice on the same sound--there is never enough of it simply because of interference and the rigidity of the brain. But both courses do something first which avoids in part the interference caused by the vernacular, in this case, Spanish. In both courses, the first contact the students have with the sounds is through slides in the University course, and through pictures in the seventh-grade course. This takes the written representation of the word away from the eyes of the students. Why is this so? Most phonetic courses in English for Spanish-speaking students drill the new or similar foreign sounds by using print, and they do this from the very start. I believe this to be wrong methodology, particularly when the learners are adult and literate Spanish-speaking students. To these students, written symbols usually have one phonetic value, for so is the case in their vernacular, Spanish. A written o is forever /o/ to these students; a written u is forever the sound /u/. That is the programmed information in our Spanish brains. The idea that a symbol, let us say that of the written o or u--as is true in English--could represent more than one spoken sound is hard to believe for Spanish-speaking students. This fact of the English language must be taught to the students systematically

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6 Bernard X. Harleston, "Learning Theory, Language Learning," Seminar in Psycholinguistics, Tufts University, Summer 1961, p. 43.

and frequently, if it is going to be learned at all. Of course, both courses incorporate most of the important spellings of the English vocalic and consonantal sounds. Here you can see the visual representation of the ten words I use in the course for the seventh grade for the sound /ʌ/, the everpresent "schwa" of the English language. This is the lesson I teach on the video-tape. Thus with a visual representation, the students look at the "things," not at the spellings: bud, brush, bus, etc. The conditioned triggering in the brain of the sound /u/ when the letter u is seen--the interference of the vernacular--is not present. The students see the object, and they recognize it: un capullo, un cepillo, una guagua, etc. Next, they hear the English word. There is a much better chance of hearing the new and strange sound now, for there may not be a competing and different sound in the brain.

It is good to remind ourselves at this moment that English has five vocalic sounds that are completely new to Spanish-speaking students--/ʌ/, /ɪ/, /ʊ/, /æ/, and /ɝ/. It is necessary to reduce the interference of the vernacular as much as possible when teaching these sounds. The students cannot hear these sounds at first. (My own experience: I could not hear the difference between sheep and ship, hot and hat, pen and pin, base and vase, think and sin, pull and pool, cut and caught, etc., for quite a long time.) I have found the technique described here as most useful in getting the students to concentrate first of all on hearing the new sounds and in producing them. After this has been attained, then you can drill from print, which is valuable and economical.

My third point is presented here in order to minimize some of the negative feelings I may have caused by the above comments on the difficulty an adult speaker has in hearing and producing sounds which are new to his phonetic tradition or brain sound map. The nature of oral language furnishes us with invaluable help in teaching these English sounds. Many languages have non-phonemic, non-significant vocalic features that correspond to significant

sounds of other languages. Experiments show that one can learn to perceive these non-significant features of one's own language quite easily in another.[7] Puerto Rican Spanish has the /ʌ/, the /ɪ/, the /ʊ/, the /æ/, and even the /ɜ/, but not as Spanish vowel phonemes. They are allophones of the five Spanish vowel phonemes. For example, in Puerto Rican Spanish we hear /sí/, /míra/. We can also hear /hə/, /əhʌ́/. After having learned to hear the so very un-Spanish English vowel phonemes mentioned above, the students will be able to produce them, for it is only a matter of time and effort from perception to production.

Coming back to the visual representation of practice words: I have found them to be intrinsically more interesting than the printed word in verbal drills, besides less confusing to Spanish speakers. They seem to keep the interest of the students' alive regardless of the length of the practice. Why do the students become so motivated? Is it because I start from meaning? Is it the reduction of the interference of the vernacular and this makes the drills that follow more satisfying? Is it the presence of the visual? Possibly it is all three.

The fourth point I would like to discuss here is the use of tapes in the course. A teacher who is a native speaker of the language may feel he does not need tapes. True: one feels one controls the class better. But what if you teach four classes a day, or more? Tapes make it possible for any teacher to have the indispensable repetition drills as often as possible without becoming unduly tired. On the other hand, if the teacher is not a very good model, he can find a good one for his students on a tape recorded by a native speaker of English. This is what our seventh grade course has tried to do for some of the Puerto Rican teachers who lack a good command of oral English. The whole course is on tape.

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7 Robert Brown, Words and Things (Glencoe: Teh Free Press, 1958) p. 215.

Both courses end with what I call the "freedom lesson." This lesson is a correlation lesson on the symbols that the courses use and those used by one of the standard pocket dictionaries in the market. I have chosen the Appleton-Cuyás English-Spanish Dictionary, in pocket book form. But the Chicago pocket dictionary, Castillo and Bond, can also be used. The students are instructed on how to interpret the symbols. Now they know what the dictionary symbols refer to. In the lesson, they actually transcribe a short selection which they recite before their classmates. Through this lesson I have tried to liberate the students from the course itself by giving them an accessible and cheap tool with which to continue growing on their own on their use of oral English.

I would like to finish this short presentation by stating the following. With students who are weak not just in oral English but also in their knowledge and use of grammatical structures, in reading and in writing, both of my courses cannot by themselves teach the students to speak English well. What do they do? They give the students a set of oral and listening skills which can help them to speak and understand English better IF they continue practicing these skills in an oral course in grammar. If this is not done, then the course would be a charming little activity, exciting and stimulating, but soon forgotten. Because such is the nature of the beast.

Thank you.